Chapter 5 : The Catholic Reformation and the Wars of Religion

The Catholic Reformation has often been called the Counter Reformation. Both terms have some validity. The term Catholic Reformation refers specifically to Roman Catholic efforts to bring a spirit of reform to the Catholic Church. This Catholic Reformation was, in fact, underway even before the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Once the Protestant Reformation began, the Roman Catholics, in addition to continuing their efforts to reform the Catholic Church, initiated a campaign to combat the activities of the Protestants.

As religious emotions intensified and the lines of religious division became more sharply defined, Europeans became involved in the wars of religion. While these wars resulted in part from religious differences, it is important to realize that political issues also played a major role.

The Catholic Reformation

The Papacy and the Catholic Reformation

During the sixteenth century, the papacy played a central role in the renewal and reform of the Catholic Church.

Sixteenth-Century Popes

Pope Paul III (r. 1534-1549) had the longest pontificate of the sixteenth century. Serving during some of the most critical years of the Protestant Reformation, Paul III was a moderate reformer who appointed virtuous and capable men to high church offices, rather than individuals who were interested primarily in promoting their personal or family fortunes. He was, however, rather cautious in dealing with the challenge presented by the Reformation. The cause of reform suffered a temporary setback during the papacy of Julius III (r. 1550-1555), a worldly pope who revived some of the worst practices of the Renaissance papacy (see Chapter 2).

The papacy became more strongly committed to reform during the pontificates of Paul IV (r. 1555-1559), Pius IV (r. 1559-1565), and Pius V (r. 1566-1572). These three popes were dedicated both to the reform of the Roman Catholic Church and to combating the Protestant Reformation.

The Roman Inquisition

To assist in the campaign against what was regarded as heresy, the papacy established the Congregation of the Holy Office, known as the Roman Inquisition. The Inquisition used severe methods, including torture, secret witnesses, and the admission of hearsay and rumor as evidence, to secure the conviction of suspected heretics. In order to discourage the dissemination of views regarded as heretical, the Roman Inquisition established a system of censorship that maintained an Index of Prohibited Books.

The Council of Trent

Pope Paul III summoned the Council of Trent, which met in three sessions, from 1545 to 1547, from 1551 to 1552, and from 1562 to 1563. The Council of Trent, an assembly of archbishops, bishops, and other church leaders, both defined Roman Catholic doctrine and initiated a program to eliminate abuses in the church.

Doctrinal Reaffirmation

In its consideration of doctrine, the Council of Trent rejected any possibility of compromise with the Protestants. Instead, the council strongly reaffirmed traditional Catholic teaching. The council declared, for example, that the sources of the Christian faith were to be found both in the Bible and in the traditions of the Church, thereby rejecting the Protestant belief in the supremacy of the Bible. The council also rejected Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and restated the doctrine of the seven sacraments, which included not only baptism and holy communion, but also confirmation, penance, matrimony, holy orders, and extreme unction (the anointing of the sick). The council also reaffirmed the validity of the invocation of the prayers of the saints and the veneration of relics and images, as well as the doctrines regarding purgatory and indulgences. Protestants generally rejected these practices and doctrines.

Reforms of Catholic Church

In its efforts to eliminate abuses in the church, the Council of Trent instructed archbishops and bishops to live in the areas they served. This was designed to eliminate the problem of absenteeism. Simony, the sale of church offices, was forbidden. The council instructed bishops to maintain seminaries for the education of the clergy. The council also decreed that indulgences should no longer be granted in exchange for financial contributions and that no fees should be levied for administering the sacraments.

While the Council of Trent retained the Latin language as the language of worship, the clergy were instructed to preach regularly in the vernacular.

Papal Authority

Finally, the Council of Trent strengthened the authority of the pope as head of the Catholic Church by decreeing that

none of its decisions would become effective without papal approval. In this way, the council made it clear that the authority of the pope was superior to that of a council. In January 1564, Pope Pius IV issued a bull putting the decrees of the Council of Trent into effect.

The Jesuits

The establishment of new religious orders was a sign of the growing spirit of reform in the Catholic Church. The Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits, quickly became the most influential of the religious orders established during the sixteenth century.

Ignatius Loyola

The Society of Jesus was founded by St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), a Basque from northern Spain. Serving in the Spanish army, Ignatius was wounded in a battle with the French. While he was recovering from his injuries, he experienced a religious conversion. Rather than fighting for the glory of the Spanish king, he would now fight for the greater glory of God.

In 1534, Ignatius and six followers took the vows of poverty and chastity. They were ordained to the priesthood in 1537. Three years later, Pope Paul III formally authorized the Society of Jesus. Ignatius wrote *The Spiritual Exercises*, setting forth a system of disciplined prayer and asceticism to guide the members of the society.

Organization of the Order

The Jesuits were organized along military lines, and the head of the society was known as the general. Emphasis was placed on obedience to authority. While the Jesuits have often been called "the first legion of the Lord," the militaristic aspects of the society can be overemphasized. These features should be understood primarily as metaphor, similar to the metaphor of the modern Christian hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and similar, too, to the metaphor used by St. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians. "Put on the whole armor of God," Paul declared, "that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

Activities of the Jesuits

The Jesuits dedicated themselves to combatting the spread of Protestantism. They have been credited with the recovery of Catholicism in Poland after that country had apparently been lost to Calvinism. The Jesuits also helped preserve the Catholic faith in Bavaria in southern Germany and in the southern Netherlands. They also ministered, at great personal risk, to Catholics in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

In addition, the Jesuits worked in the education of youth and in the foreign missions. The most famous of the early Jesuit missionaries was St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), one of Loyola's original companions, who served as a missionary in India and Japan. Other Jesuit missionaries labored in Asia, Africa, and the New World.

Other New Religious Orders

In addition to the Jesuits, several other new religious orders emerged during the sixteenth century.

The Capuchins

Organized in central Italy, the Capuchins received papal approval in 1528. A reform of the Franciscan order, the Capuchins sought to return to the original principles of poverty and piety emphasized by St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. The Capuchins became known for their preaching and along with the Jesuits, did much to promote the recovery of Roman Catholicism in several areas of Europe where Protestantism originally seemed likely to triumph. The Capuchins also became active missionaries in Africa, Asia, and America.

The Oratorians

St. Philip Neri (1515-1595), who became known as the apostle of Rome, established a community of priests known as the Congregation of the Oratory. Receiving the approval of the papacy in 1575, the Oratorians worked to promote the practice of religion in the areas they served through prayer, preaching, and the administration of the sacraments.

The Theatines

Founded in 1523, the Theatines were a society of priests whose mission was to improve the level of education and discipline among the clergy.

The Ursulines

The Ursulines, an order of nuns established in 1535, dedicated themselves to the education of girls.

The Discalced Carmelites

St. Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), a Spanish mystic, organized a convent of Discalced Carmelites (Barefoot Carmelites) at Avila in 1562. These cloistered nuns lived in strict observance of the Carmelite rule, which emphasized a life of poverty and simplicity devoted to prayer and contemplation. St. Theresa took the lead in organizing other convents of Discalced Carmelites, and she also assisted St. John of the Cross, another Spanish mystic, in organizing similar communities for men.

The Anti-Protestant Crusade of King Philip II

Spain remained a strongly Catholic country and made a major contribution to the Catholic struggle against the Protestant Reformation.

Domains of King Philip II

In the late sixteenth century, Spain was ruled by King Philip II (r. 1556-1598), the son of the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r. 1519-1556), who had also been King Charles I of Spain (r. 1516-1556). At this time, Spain was the world's strongest military and naval power.

Philip II's domains included not only Spain and the Spanish empire but also the Netherlands, the Free County of Burgundy (Franche Comté), the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Sardinia, and the Balearic Islands in the western Mediterranean. In 1580, Philip II gained Portugal, thus securing control of the Portuguese empire.

Philip II hoped to use Spanish power in support of the Catholic cause against both the Protestants and the Moslem Turks. He became involved in war on several fronts, in the Netherlands, against England, and against the Turks.

The Dutch Revolt

In the Netherlands, Philip confronted a serious revolt against Spanish rule. Many Netherlanders resented foreign rule, and the northern provinces had adopted Calvinism. In addition, there was a widespread feeling among the Netherlanders that their industry and trade were being taxed too highly by the Spanish. The revolt in the Netherlands thus involved an explosive mixture of nationalism, religion, and money.

The Duke of Alva's Reign of Terror

In 1567, Philip sent the Duke of Alva (1508-1582) to the Netherlands with orders to suppress both the revolt against Spanish rule and Calvinism. The duke's reign of terror lasted for six years, resulting in the execution of several thousand rebels. Despite Spanish repression, the revolt continued.

Dutch Independence

In 1579, Spanish rule was restored in the ten southern provinces (modem Belgium), which had remained Catholic. The seven northern provinces, which were predominantly Calvinist, formed the Union of Utrecht (1579) and continued the struggle against Spain. The Dutch of the northern provinces found an effective leader in William of Orange (1533-1584), known as William the Silent.

In 1584, Spanish agents assassinated William the Silent, but the Dutch struggle for independence continued. Finally, in 1609, Spain agreed to a twelve-year truce. This represented a virtual Spanish acceptance of Dutch independence, which was formally recognized by the Peace of Westphalia of 1648.

The Battle of Lepanto

Encouraged by Pope Pius V, Philip II helped organize a combined Spanish, Genovese, and Venetian fleet to fight the Turks. This fleet, commanded by Philip II's half brother, Don Juan of Austria (1547-1578), destroyed a Turkish naval force at Lepanto in the Gulf of Corinth, Greece, in October 1571. The Battle of Lepanto was the last great Spanish naval victory. This and other Spanish victories over the Turks weakened, but did not destroy, Turkish power in the Mediterranean.

The Spanish Armada

At the beginning of his reign, Philip II was allied with England as a consequence of his marriage to Queen Mary (see Chapter 4), but this alliance ended with Mary's death and the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558. The Spanish king hoped both to conquer England and to restore that country to the Roman Catholic fold. For several years, he encouraged conspiracies against Elizabeth. 'When these failed, he decided to take more direct action, launching the Spanish Armada against England in 1588. The plan called for the Armada to join forces with a Spanish army near Dunkirk in the Netherlands and then to carry out an invasion of England.

Most of the English ships that fought the Armada were smaller than the Spanish vessels, but they were fast and easily maneuvered. In addition, they were armed with heavier long-range guns.

English Victory

On July 21,1588, the Armada entered the English Channel, headed toward Dunkirk. For eight days, the English ships fought the Spanish, aided by a furious storm, which became known as the "Protestant wind." On July 28, the Armada was dispersed and fled to the north, around the tip of Scotland.

The Spanish Armada lost about forty ships, and many of those that made their way back to Spain were unfit for further service. Spanish deaths totaled in the thousands. The English lost no ships and about 100 men.

The defeat of the Spanish Armada dealt a serious blow to Spain's prestige and marked the first step in the long process of Spain's decline as a major power.

The French Wars of Religion

Conflict Between Catholics and Huguenots

France remained a predominantly Catholic country. Of a total population of about 16 million, some 1.2 million embraced Calvinism. However, a larger proportion of the French nobility became Calvinists, at least temporarily. Conflict between Catholics and Calvinists, known as Huguenots, led to more than three decades of civil war.

This conflict involved both religious and political issues, since some elements of the French nobility supported the Huguenot cause as a part of their struggle against the power of the monarchy.

King Henry II and His Heirs

From 1547 to 1589, France had the misfortune to be ruled by a series of ineffective rulers. King Henry II (r. 1547-1559) was physically robust but weak-willed. Following Henry II's death, his widow, Catherine de' Medici (1519-1589), a member of the famous Florentine family, became the key figure during the reigns of her three sons, who succeeded in order of birth to the French throne: Francis II (r. 1559-1560), Charles IX (r. 1560-1574), and Henry III (r. 1574-1589). None of these three kings could cope effectively with the intensifying Catholic-Huguenot conflict, nor for that matter could the queen mother.

Open warfare between the Catholics and Huguenots broke out in 1562. The powerful Guise family led the Catholic cause, while the Bourbon family led the Huguenots. The first eight years of fighting ended indecisively, and an uneasy truce was concluded in 1570.

The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre

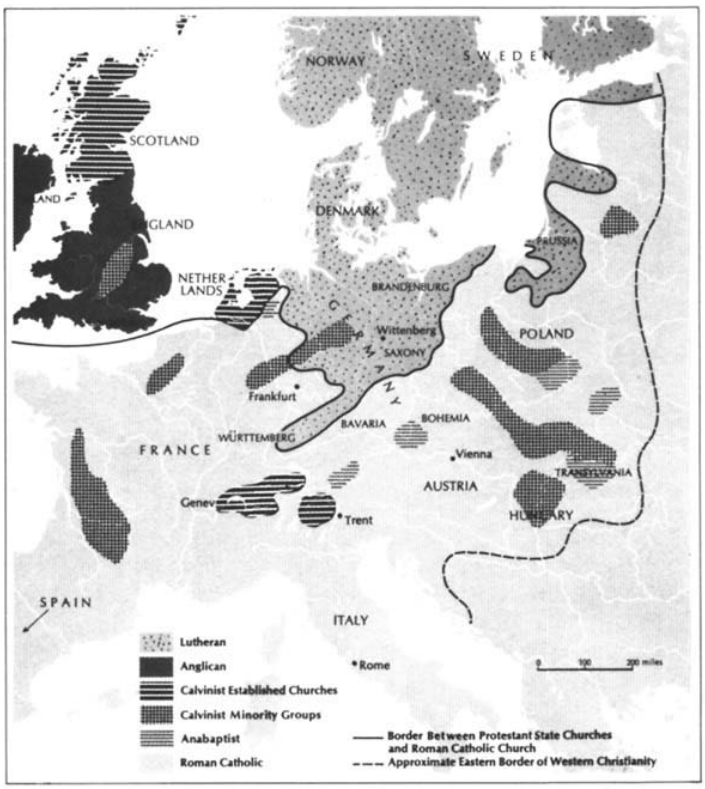
Alarmed by the growing power of the Huguenots, Catherine de' Medici decided that they must be exterminated. At midnight on August 24, 1572, St. Bartholomew's Day, Catherine gave a signal from a Paris church tower which began the massacre of Huguenots in Paris. The massacre then spread to the provinces, taking the lives of several thousand Huguenots.

The War of the Three Henrys

Following the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Henry of Navarre (1553-1610), a Bourbon, emerged as the Huguenots' leader. King Henry III attempted to form a moderate Catholic faction as an alternative both to the Huguenots and to the uncompromising Guise faction. Catholic-Huguenot conflict continued, culminating in the War of the Three Henrys (1585-1589), a conflict between King Henry III, Henry of Navarre, and Henry, the Duke of Guise (1550-1588).

Regarding the Duke of Guise as a serious threat to his own power, King Henry III had him assassinated in December 1588. The Guise faction retaliated with the assassination of the king in July 1589.

Henry of Navarre now became King Henry IV (r. 1589-1610), the first Bourbon king of France. Succeeding where others had failed, Henry IV made peace between the contending religious factions (see Chapter 8).



Religious Map of Europe, c. 1560

The Thirty Years' War

The Origins of the Conflict

The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 had brought a temporary truce in the religious conflict in the German states (see Chapter 4). This settlement had recognized only Lutherans and Roman Catholics, but Calvinism had subsequently made gains in a number of states. The Calvinists began to demand recognition of their rights. The Thirty Years' War began, however, as a direct result of a conflict in the Hapsburg-ruled Kingdom of Bohemia.

The Bohemian Period (1618-1625)

In 1617, the Bohemian Diet elected Ferdinand of Styria as king of Bohemia. Ferdinand, a member of the Hapsburg family, became Holy Roman emperor two years later, as Ferdinand II (r. 1619-1637). He was an ardent supporter of the Catholic cause.

Calvinist Revolt

Ferdinand's election alarmed Bohemian Calvinists, who feared the loss of their religious rights. In May 1618, the Calvinist revolt began when the rebels threw two Catholic members of the Bohemian royal council from a window some seventy feet above the ground. Both councillors fell into a pile of manure and suffered only minor injuries. This incident became known as the Defenestration of Prague.

Taking control of Prague, the rebels declared Ferdinand deposed and elected a new king, Frederick V (1596-1632), the elector of the Palatinate in western Germany

and a Calvinist. The German Protestant Union, which Frederick headed, provided some aid to the Bohemian rebels.

Catholic Victory

Emperor Ferdinand II won the support of King Maximilian I (r. 1573-1651) of Bavaria, the leader of the Catholic League. Troops of the Holy Roman Empire and Bavaria, commanded by Baron Tilly (1559-1632), invaded Bohemia. In November 1620, Tilly won a decisive victory over the forces of Frederick V at the Battle of White Mountain, near Prague. Frederick, known derisively as the "Winter King," fled to Holland. Emperor Ferdinand II regained the Bohemian throne, while King Maximilian of Bavaria acquired the Palatinate. The Bohemian period of the Thirty Years' War thus ended with a Hapsburg and Catholic victory. The Calvinist-led revolt in Bohemia had been suppressed, while in Germany, the Palatinate had been transferred from Protestant to Catholic control.

The Danish Period (1625-1629)

The Danish period of the conflict began when King Christian IV (r. 1588-1648), the Lutheran ruler of Denmark, intervened in 1625 to support the Protestant cause against Emperor Ferdinand II. King Christian was also the duke of Holstein and therefore a prince of the Holy Roman Empire.

Defeat of Protestant Forces

The emperor secured the assistance of Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583-1634), who raised an independent army of 50,000 men. The combined forces of Wallenstein and Tilly defeated Christian IV in August 1626 and then occupied the duchy of Holstein the following year.

End of Danish Period

The Treaty of Lübeck of 1629 restored Holstein to Christian IV, but the Danish king pledged not to intervene further in German affairs. The Danish period of the war, like the Bohemian period, thus ended with a Hapsburg and Catholic victory.

The Swedish Period (1630-1635)

The Catholic victories alarmed Protestants almost everywhere. Furthermore, the victories of the emperor endangered the independence of the German princes, while the French Bourbons were concerned about the growth of Hapsburg power.

Widening of the War

The Protestant cause soon found a new defender in King Gustavus Adolphus (r. 1611-1632) of Sweden. In the summer of 1630, the Swedes moved into Germany. Later in the year, France and Sweden signed an alliance, and France entered the war against the Hapsburgs.

The Thirty Years' War had begun primarily as a German conflict over religious issues. The conflict now became a wider European war, fought mainly over political issues, as Catholic France and Protestant Sweden joined forces against the Catholic Hapsburgs.

The Course of Battle

During the early stages of the conflict, the Swedes won several notable victories. Tilly, the imperial commander, fell in battle in 1632.

Frightened by his enemies' victories, Emperor Ferdinand II called on Wallenstein to form a new army. In November 1632, at the Battle of Lützen, the Swedes defeated Wallenstein, but Gustavus Adolphus was killed in the fighting.

When Wallenstein entered into secret negotiations with Sweden and France, Ferdinand II relieved him of his command in February 1634. The general was assassinated a few days later. In the autumn, the emperor's army decisively defeated the Swedes at Nördlingen in southern Germany.

The Treaty of Prague

The deaths of both Gustavus Adolphus and Wallenstein, together with the exhaustion of both the Holy Roman emperor and the German Protestant princes, brought an end to the Swedish period of the war. The Treaty of Prague, signed in 1635, generally strengthened the Hapsburgs and weakened the power of the German princes.

The French Period (1635-1648)

The settlement reached in the Treaty of Prague was wrecked by the French decision to intervene directly in the war. Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), the chief minister of King Louis XIII (r. 1610-1643) of France (see Chapter 8), wanted to weaken the power of the Hapsburgs and take the province of Alsace from the Holy Roman Empire. In addition, Richelieu had designs against Spain arid its Hapsburg king, Philip IV (r. 1621-1665).

In Germany, the French could rely on support from the Swedes and a number of German princes in the struggle against the Hapsburg Holy Roman emperor, while France focused its attention on the war against Spain.

Both in Germany and in the Franco-Spanish conflict, the fortunes of war fluctuated. For a time, the forces of the Holy Roman emperor, aided by King Maximilian of Bavaria and other Catholic princes, more than held their own against the Swedes and German Protestants. France's success against Spain, however, enabled the French to send larger forces into Germany. This helped tip the balance in favor of the emperor's foes.

Emperor Ferdinand II died in 1637 and was succeeded by his son, Ferdinand III (r. 1637-1657). Peace negotiations began in 1641, but made little progress until

the death of Cardinal Richelieu in 1642 and the French occupation of Bavaria in 1646.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648)

The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 ended the Thirty Years' War. Sweden, Brandenburg, and France all gained territory. Sweden acquired western Pomerania, while eastern Pomerania was assigned to Brandenburg. France annexed part of Alsace and some nearby territory. The settlement formally recognized the independence of the Dutch Republic and Switzerland and granted the German states the right to make treaties and alliances, thereby further weakening the authority of the Holy Roman emperor. In religious affairs, the Peace of Westphalia expanded the Peace of Augsburg to include Calvinists, as well as Catholics and Lutherans.

The Peace of Westphalia ended the Holy Roman emperor's hope of restoring both his own power and the Catholic faith throughout the empire. The empire was now, more than ever, fragmented into a number of virtually independent states.

The end of the Thirty Years' War left Hapsburg Spain isolated. The French war against Spain continued until 1659, when the Treaty of the Pyrenees awarded France part of the Spanish Netherlands and some territory in northern Spain. King Philip IV of Spain agreed to the marriage of his daughter Maria Theresa to King Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715) of France.

Together, the Peace of Westphalia and the Treaty of the Pyrenees established France as the predominant power on the European continent.

The Catholic Reformation succeeded both in bringing a much-needed spirit of reform to the Roman Catholic Church and in stemming the tide of Protestant expansion in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church was unable to regain the central position in Western European society it had held during the Middle Ages.

The wars of religion brought mixed results. While King Philip II of Spain succeeded in reducing the power of the Moslem Turks in the Mediterranean, he failed in his efforts to restore Roman Catholicism in England and lost control of the heavily Calvinist Dutch Netherlands. France remained a predominantly Catholic country, although it continued to have a significant Huguenot minority. In the Holy Roman Empire, the Hapsburgs failed to destroy Protestantism and in the process, suffered a further decrease of their own power. The power of the Spanish Hapsburgs declined, as well, and by the mid-seventeenth century, France had become the most powerful state on the European continent.